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GUNEVERE  
PENEYSON  
&  
WM MORRIS

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Sir Launcelot and  
Queen Guinevere  
*Lord Tennyson*



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## Launcelot and Guinevere

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### A FRAGMENT

LIKE souls that balance joy and pain,  
With tears and smiles from heaven  
again  
The maiden Spring upon the plain  
Came in a sun-lit fall of rain.

In crystal vapour everywhere  
Blue isles of heaven laugh'd between,  
And, far in forest-deeps unseen,  
The topmost elmtree gather'd green  
From draughts of balmy air.

Sometimes the linnet piped his song:  
Sometimes the throstle whistled strong:  
Sometimes the sparrowhawk, wheel'd along,  
Hush'd all the groves from fear of wrong:

By grassy capes with fuller sound  
In curves the yellowing river ran,  
And drooping chestnut-buds began  
To spread into the perfect fan,  
Above the teeming ground.

Then, in the boyhood of the year,  
Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere  
Rode thro' the coverts of the deer,  
With blissful treble ringing clear.

She seem'd a part of joyous Spring:  
A gown of grass-green silk she wore,  
Buckled with golden clasps before;  
A light-green tuft of plumes she bore  
Closed in a golden ring.

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## Launcelot and Guinevere

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Now on some twisted ivy-net,  
Now by some tinkling rivulet,  
In mosses mixt with violet  
Her cream-white mule his pastern set:  
And fleeter now she skimm'd the  
plains

Than she whose elfin prancer springs  
By night to eery warblings,  
When all the glimmering moorland rings  
With jingling bridle-reins.

As she fled fast thro' sun and shade,  
The happy winds upon her play'd,  
Blowing the ringlet from the braid:  
She look'd so lovely, as she sway'd  
The rein with dainty finger-tips,  
A man had given all other bliss,  
And all his worldly worth for this,  
To waste his whole heart in one kiss  
Upon her perfect lips.

Guinevere  
*Lord Tennyson*



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## Guinevere

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QUEEN GUINEVERE had fled the court,  
and sat

There in the holy house at Almesbury  
Weeping, none with her save a little maid,  
A novice: one low light betwixt them burn'd  
Blurr'd by the creeping mist, for all abroad,  
Beneath a moon unseen albeit at full,  
The white mist, like a face-cloth to the face,  
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was still.

For hither had she fled, her cause of flight  
Sir Modred; he the nearest to the King,  
His nephew, ever like a subtle beast  
Lay couchant with his eyes upon the throne,  
Ready to spring, waiting a chance: for this,  
He chill'd the popular praises of the King  
With silent smiles of slow disparagement;  
And tamper'd with the Lords of the White  
Horse,  
Heathen, the brood by Hengist left; and sought  
To make disruption in the Table Round  
Of Arthur, and to splinter it into feuds  
Serving his traitorous end; and all his aims  
Were sharpen'd by strong hate for Lancelot.

For thus it chanced one morn when all the  
court,  
Green-suited, but with plumes that mock'd the  
may,  
Had been, their wont, a-maying and return'd,  
That Modred still in green, all ear and eye,  
Climb'd to the high top of the garden-wall  
To spy some secret scandal if he might,

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## Guinevere

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And saw the Queen who sat betwixt her best  
Enid, and lissome Vivien, of her court  
The wildest and the worst; and more than this  
He saw not, for Sir Lancelot passing by  
Spied where he crouch'd, and as the gardener's  
hand

Picks from the colewort a green caterpillar,  
So from the high wall and the flowering grove  
Of grasses Lancelot pluck'd him by the heel,  
And cast him as a worm upon the way;  
But when he knew the Prince tho' marr'd with  
dust,

He, reverencing king's blood in a bad man,  
Made such excuses as he might, and these  
Full knightly without scorn; for in those days  
No knight of Arthur's noblest dealt in scorn;  
But, if a man were halt or hunch'd, in him  
By those whom God had made full-limb'd and  
tall,

Scorn was allow'd as part of his defect,  
And he was answer'd softly by the King  
And all his Table. So Sir Lancelot holp  
To raise the Prince who rising, twice or thrice  
Full sharply smote his knees, and smiled, and  
went:

But, ever after, the small violence done  
Rankled in him and ruffled all his heart,  
As the sharp wind that ruffles all day long  
A little bitter pool about a stone  
On the bare coast.

But when Sir Lancelot told  
This matter to the Queen, at first she laugh'd

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## Guinevere

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Lightly, to think of Modred's dusty fall,  
Then shudder'd, as the village wife who cries  
"I shudder, some one steps across my grave;"  
Then laugh'd again, but faintlier, for indeed  
She half-foresaw that he, the subtle beast,  
Would track her guilt until he found, and hers  
Would be for evermore a name of scorn.  
Henceforward rarely could she front in Hall,  
Or elsewhere, Modred's narrow foxy face,  
Heart-hiding smile, and gray persistent eye:  
Henceforward too, the Powers that tend the  
soul,  
To help it from the death that cannot die,  
And save it even in extremes, began  
To vex and plague her. Many a time for hours,  
Beside the placid breathings of the King,  
In the dead night, grim faces came and went  
Before her, or a vague spiritual fear—  
Like to some doubtful noise of creaking doors,  
Heard by the watcher in a haunted house,  
That keeps the rust of murder on the walls—  
Held her awake: or if she slept, she dream'd  
An awful dream; for then she seem'd to stand  
On some vast plain before a setting sun,  
And from the sun there swiftly made at her  
A ghastly something, and its shadow flew  
Before it, till it touch'd her, and she turn'd—  
When lo! her own, that broadening from her  
feet,  
And blackening, swallow'd all the land, and  
in it  
Far cities burnt, and with a cry she woke.

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## Guinevere

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And all this trouble did not pass but grew;  
Till ev'n the clear face of the guileless King,  
And trustful courtesies of household life,  
Became her bane; and at the last she said,  
“O Lancelot, get thee hence to thine own land,  
For if thou tarry we shall meet again,  
And if we meet again, some evil chance  
Will make the smouldering scandal break and  
blaze

Before the people, and our lord the King.”  
And Lancelot ever promised, but remain’d,  
And still they met and met. Again she said,  
“O Lancelot, if thou love me get thee hence.”  
And then they were agreed upon a night  
(When the good King should not be there) to  
meet

And part for ever. Passion-pale they met  
And greeted: hands in hands, and eye to eye,  
Low on the border of her couch they sat  
Stammering and staring: it was their last hour,  
A madness of farewells. And Modred brought  
His creatures to the basement of the tower  
For testimony; and crying with full voice  
“Traitor, come out, ye are trapt at last,” aroused  
Lancelot, who rushing outward lionlike  
Leapt on him, and hurl’d him headlong, and he  
fell

Stunn’d, and his creatures took and bare him off  
And all was still: then she, “the end is come  
And I am shamed for ever;” and he said  
“Mine be the shame; mine was the sin: but  
rise,

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## Guinevere

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And fly to my strong castle overseas:  
There will I hide thee, till my life shall end,  
There hold thee with my life against the world.”  
She answer’d “Lancelot, wilt thou hold me so?  
Nay friend, for we have taken our farewells.  
Would God, that thou couldst hide me from  
myself!

Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou  
Unwedded: yet rise now, and let us fly,  
For I will draw me into sanctuary,  
And bide my doom.” So Lancelot got her horse,  
Set her thereon, and mounted on his own,  
And then they rode to the divided way,  
There kiss’d, and parted weeping: for he past,  
Love-loyal to the least wish of the Queen,  
Back to his land; but she to Almesbury  
Fled all night long by glimmering waste and  
weald,  
And heard the Spirits of the waste and weald  
Moan as she fled, or thought she heard them  
moan:

And in herself she moan’d “too late, too late!”  
Till in the cold wind that foreruns the morn,  
A blot in heaven, the Raven, flying high,  
Croak’d, and she thought “he spies a field of  
death;  
For now the Heathen of the Northern Sea,  
Lured by the crimes and frailties of the court,  
Begin to slay the folk, and spoil the land.”

And when she came to Almesbury she spake  
There to the nuns, and said, “mine enemies

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## Guinevere

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Pursue me, but, O peaceful Sisterhood,  
Receive, and yield me sanctuary, nor ask  
Her name, to whom ye yield it, till her time  
To tell you"; and her beauty, grace and power,  
Wrought as a charm upon them, and they spared  
To ask it.

So the stately Queen abode  
For many a week, unknown, among the nuns;  
Nor with them mix'd, nor told her name, nor  
sought,

Wrapt in her grief, for housel or for shrift,  
But communed only with the little maid,  
Who pleased her with a babbling heedlessness  
Which often lured her from herself; but now,  
This night, a rumour wildly blown about  
Came, that Sir Modred had usurped the realm,  
And leagued him with the heathen, while the  
King

Was waging war on Lancelot: then she thought,  
"With what a hate the people and the King  
Must hate me," and bow'd down upon her hands  
Silent, until the little maid, who brook'd  
No silence, brake it, uttering "late! so late!  
What hour, I wonder, now?" and when she drew  
No answer, by and by began to hum  
An air the nuns had taught her; "late, so  
late!"

Which when she heard, the Queen look'd up,  
and said,  
"O maiden, if indeed you list to sing,  
Sing, and unbind my heart that I may weep."  
Whereat full willingly sang the little maid.

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## Guinevere

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“Late, late, so late! and dark the night and  
chill!

Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.

Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

“No light had we: for that we do repent;  
And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.  
Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

“No light: so late! and dark and chill the  
night!

O let us in, that we may find the light!

Too late, too late: ye cannot enter now.

“Have we not heard the bridegroom is so  
sweet?

O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet!

No, no, too late! ye cannot enter now.”

So sang the novice, while full passionately,  
Her head upon her hands, remembering  
Her thought when first she came, wept the sad  
Queen.

Then said the little novice prattling to her:

“O pray you, noble lady, weep no more;  
But let my words, the words of one so small,  
Who knowing nothing knows but to obey,  
And if I do not there is penance given—  
Comfort your sorrows; for they do not flow  
From evil done; right sure am I of that,  
Who see your tender grace and stateliness.  
But weigh your sorrows with our lord the King's,  
And weighing find them less; for gone is he

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## Guinevere

---

To wage grim war against Sir Lancelot there,  
Round that strong castle where he holds the  
Queen;

And Modred whom he left in charge of all,  
The traitor—Ah sweet lady, the King's grief  
For his own self, and his own Queen, and realm,  
Must needs be thrice as great as any of ours.

For me, I thank the saints, I am not great.

For if there ever come a grief to me

I cry my cry in silence, and have done:

None knows it, and my tears have brought me  
good:

But even were the griefs of little ones

As great as those of great ones, yet this grief  
Is added to the griefs the great must bear,  
That howsoever much they may desire  
Silence, they cannot weep behind a cloud:

As even here they talk at Almesbury

About the good King and his wicked Queen,  
And were I such a King with such a Queen,  
Well might I wish to veil her wickedness,  
But were I such a King, it could not be."

Then to her own sad heart mutter'd the  
Queen,

"Will the child kill me with her innocent talk?"  
But openly she answer'd "must not I,  
If this false traitor have displaced his lord,  
Grieve with the common grief of all the realm?"

"Yea," said the maid, "this is all woman's  
grief,

That *she* is woman, whose disloyal life

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## Guinevere

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Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round  
Which good King Arthur founded, years ago,  
With signs and miracles and wonders, there  
At Camelot, ere the coming of the Queen."

Then thought the Queen within herself again,  
"Will the child kill me with her foolish prate?"  
But openly she spake and said to her:  
"O little maid, shut in by nunnery walls,  
What canst thou know of Kings and Tables  
Round,  
Or what of signs and wonders, but the signs  
And simple miracles of thy nunnery?"

To whom the little novice garrulously,  
"Yea, but I know: the land was full of signs  
And wonders ere the coming of the Queen.  
So said my father, and himself was knight  
Of the great Table—at the founding of it;  
And rode thereto from Lyonesse, and he said  
That as he rode, an hour or maybe twain  
After the sunset, down the coast, he heard  
Strange music, and he paused and turning—  
there,

All down the lonely coast of of Lyonesse,  
Each with a beacon-star upon his head,  
And with a wild sea-light about his feet,  
He saw them—headland after headland flame  
Far on into the rich heart of the west:  
And in the light the white mermaiden swam,  
And strong man-breasted things stood from  
the sea,  
And sent a deep sea-voice thro' all the land,

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## Guinevere

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To which the little elves of chasm and cleft  
Made answer, sounding like a distant horn.  
So said my father—yea, and furthermore,  
Next morning, while he past the dim-lit woods,  
Himself beheld three spirits mad with joy  
Come dashing down on a tall wayside flower,  
That shook beneath them, as the thistle shakes  
When three gray linnets wrangle for the seed:  
And still at evenings on before his horse  
The flickering fairy-circle wheel'd and broke  
Flying, and link'd again, and wheel'd and broke  
Flying, for all the land was full of life.  
And when at last he came to Camelot,  
A wreath of airy dancers hand-in-hand  
Swung round the lighted lantern of the hall;  
And in the hall itself was such a feast  
As never man had dream'd; for every knight  
Had whatsoever meat he long'd for served  
By hands unseen; and even as he said  
Down in the cellars merry bloated things  
Shoulder'd the spigot, straddling on the butts  
While the wine ran: so glad were spirits and men  
Before the coming of the sinful Queen.”

Then spake the Queen and somewhat bitterly.  
“Were they so glad? ill prophets were they all,  
Spirits and men: could none of them foresee,  
Not even thy wise father with his signs  
And wonders, what has fall'n upon the realm?”

To whom the novice garrulously again,  
“Yea, one, a bard; of whom my father said,

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## Guinevere

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Full many a noble war-song had he sung,  
Ev'n in the presence of an enemy's fleet,  
Between the steep cliff and the coming wave;  
And many a mystic lay of life and death  
Had chanted on the smoky mountain-tops,  
When round him bent the spirits of the hills  
With all their dewy hair blown back like flame:  
So said my father—and that night the bard  
Sang Arthur's glorious wars, and sang the  
King

As well-nigh more than man, and rail'd at those  
Who call'd him the false son of Gorloïs:  
For there was no man knew from whence he  
came;

But after tempest, when the long wave broke  
All down the thundering shores of Bude and  
Boss,

There came a day as still as heaven, and then  
They found a naked child upon the sands  
Of wild Dundagil by the Cornish sea;  
And that was Arthur; and they foster'd him  
Till he by miracle was approven king:  
And that his grave should be a mystery  
From all men, like his birth; and could he find  
A woman in her womanhood as great  
As he was in his manhood, then, he sang,  
Thetwain together well might change the world.  
But even in the middle of his song  
He falter'd, and his hand fell from the harp,  
And pale he turn'd, and reel'd, and would have  
fall'n,  
But that they stay'd him up; nor would he tell

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## Guinevere

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His vision ; but what doubt that he foresaw  
This evil work of Lancelot and the Queen?"

Then thought the Queen "lo ! they have set  
her on,  
Our simple-seeming Abbess and her nuns,  
To play upon me," and bow'd her head nor  
spake.  
Whereat the novice crying, with clasp'd hands,  
Shame on her own garrulity garrulously,  
Said the good nuns would check her gadding  
tongue

Full often, "and, sweet lady, if I seem  
To vex an ear too sad to listen to me,  
Unmannerly, with prattling and the tales  
Which my good father told me, check me too :  
Nor let me shame my father's memory, one  
Of noblest manners, tho' himself would say  
Sir Lancelot had the noblest; and he died,  
Kill'd in a tilt, come next, five summers back,  
And left me; but of others who remain,  
And of the two first-famed for courtesy—  
And pray you check me if I ask amiss—  
But pray you, which had noblest, while you  
moved  
Among them, Lancelot or our lord the King?"

Then the pale Queen look'd up and answer'd  
her  
"Sir Lancelot, as became a noble knight,  
Was gracious to all ladies, and the same  
In open battle or the tilting-field  
Forbore his own advantage, and the King

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## Guinevere

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In open battle or the tilting-field  
Forbore his own advantage, and these two  
Were the most nobly-mannered men of all;  
For manners are not idle, but the fruit  
Of loyal nature, and of noble mind."

"Yea," said the maid, "be manners such  
fair fruit?  
Then Lancelot's needs must be a thousand-fold  
Less noble, being, as all rumour runs,  
The most disloyal friend in all the world."

To which a mournful answer made the Queen.  
"O closed about by narrowing nunnery-walls,  
What knowest thou of the world, and all its  
lights  
And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe?  
If ever Lancelot, that most noble knight,  
Were for one hour less noble than himself,  
Pray for him that he scape the doom of fire,  
And weep for her, who drew him to his doom."

"Yea," said the little novice, "I pray for both;  
But I should all as soon believe that his,  
Sir Lancelot's, were as noble as the King's,  
As I should think, sweet lady, yours would be  
Such as they are, were you the sinful Queen."

So she, like many another babbler, hurt  
Whom she would soothe, and harm'd where she  
would heal;  
For here a sudden flush of wrathful heat  
Fired all the pale face of the Queen, who cried,  
"Such as thou art be never maiden more

---

## Guinevere

---

For ever! thou their tool, set on to plague  
And play upon, and harry me, petty spy  
And traitress." When that storm of anger brake  
From Guinevere, aghast the maiden rose,  
White as her veil, and stood before the Queen  
As tremulously as foam upon the beach  
Stands in a wind, ready to break and fly,  
And when the Queen had added "get thee  
hence"

Fled frightened. Then that other left alone  
Sigh'd, and began to gather heart again,  
Saying in herself "the simple, fearful child  
Meant nothing, but my own too-fearful guilt  
Simpler than any child, betrays itself.  
But help me, heaven, for surely I repent.  
For what is true repentance but in thought—  
Not ev'n in inmost thought to think again  
The sins that made the past so pleasant to us:  
And I have sworn never to see him more,  
To see him more."

And ev'n in saying this,  
Her memory from old habit of the mind  
Went slipping back upon the golden days  
In which she saw him first, when Lancelot came,  
Reputed the best knight and goodliest man,  
Ambassador, to lead her to his lord  
Arthur, and led her forth, and far ahead  
Of his and her retinue moving, they,  
Rapt in sweet talk or lively, all on love  
And sport and tilts and pleasure, (for the time  
Was maytime, and as yet no sin was dream'd,)  
Rode under groves that look'd a paradise

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## Guinevere

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Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth  
That seem'd the heavens upbreaking thro' the  
earth,  
And on from hill to hill, and every day  
Beheld at noon in some delicious dale .  
The silk pavilions of King Arthur raised  
For brief repast or afternoon repose  
By couriers gone before; and on again,  
Till yet once more ere set of sun they saw  
The Dragon of the great Pendragonship,  
That crown'd the state pavilion of the King,  
Blaze by the rushing brook or silent well.

But when the Queen immersed in such a  
trance,  
And moving thro' the past unconsciously,  
Came to that point, when first she saw the King  
Ride toward her from the city, sigh'd to find  
Her journey done, glanced at him, thought him  
cold,  
High, self-contain'd, and passionless, not like  
him,  
“Not like my Lancelot”—while she brooded  
thus  
And grew half-guilty in her thoughts again,  
There rode an armed warrior to the doors.  
A murmuring whisper thro' the nunnery ran,  
Then on a sudden a cry, “the King.” She sat  
Stiff-stricken, listening; but when armed feet  
Thro' the long gallery from the outer doors  
Rang coming, prone from off her seat she fell,  
And grovell'd with her face against the floor:

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## Guinevere

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There with her milkwhite arms and shadowy hair

She made her face a darkness from the King:  
And in the darkness heard his armed feet  
Pause by her; then came silence, then a voice,  
Monotonous and hollow like a Ghost's  
Denouncing judgment, but tho' changed the King's.

“ Liest thou here so low, the child of one  
I honour'd, happy, dead before thy shame?  
Well is it that no child is born of thee.  
The children born of thee are sword and fire,  
Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,  
The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts  
Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea.  
Whom I, while yet Sir Lancelot, my right arm,  
The mightiest of my knights, abode with me,  
Have everywhere about this land of Christ  
In twelve great battles ruining overthrown.  
And knowest thou now from whence I come—  
from him,  
From waging bitter war with him: and he,  
That did not shun to smite me in worst way,  
Had yet that grace of courtesy in him left,  
He spared to lift his hand against the King  
Who made him knight: but many a knight was slain;  
And many more, and all his kith and kin  
Clave to him, and abode in his own land.  
And many more when Modred raised revolt,  
Forgetful of their troth and fealty, clave  
To Modred, and a remnant stays with me.

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## Guinevere

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And of this remnant will I leave a part,  
True men who love me still, for whom I live,  
To guard thee in the wild hour coming on,  
Lest but a hair of this low head be harm'd.  
Fear not: thou shalt be guarded till my death.  
Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies  
Have err'd not, that I march to meet my doom.  
Thou hast not made my life so sweet to me,  
That I the King should greatly care to live;  
For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life.  
Bear with me for the last time while I show  
Ev'n for thy sake, the sin which thou hast sinn'd.  
For when the Roman left us, and their law  
Relax'd its hold upon us, and the ways  
Were fill'd with rapine, here and there a deed  
Of prowess done redress'd a random wrong.  
But I was first of all the kings who drew  
The knighthood-errant of this realm and all  
The realms together under me, their Head,  
In that fair order of my Table Round,  
A glorious company, the flower of men,  
To serve as model for the mighty world,  
And be the fair beginning of a time.  
I made them lay their hands in mine and swear  
To reverence the King, as if he were  
Their conscience, and their conscience as their  
King,  
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,  
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,  
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,  
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,  
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,

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## Guinevere

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And worship her by years of noble deeds,  
Until they won her; for indeed I knew  
Of no more subtle master under heaven  
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,  
Not only to keep down the base in man,  
But teach high thought, and amiable words  
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,  
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.  
And all this throve until I wedded thee!  
Believing 'lo mine helpmate, one to feel  
My purpose and rejoicing in my joy.'  
Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot;  
Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt;  
Then others, following these my mightiest  
knights,  
And drawing foul ensample from fair names,  
Sinn'd also, till the loathsome opposite  
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,  
And all thro' thee! so that this life of mine  
I guard as God's high gift from scathe and  
wrong,  
Not greatly care to lose; but rather think  
How sad it were for Arthur, should he live,  
To sit once more within his lonely hall,  
And miss the wonted number of my knights,  
And miss to hear high talk of noble deeds  
As in the golden days before thy sin.  
For which of us, who might be left, could speak  
Of the pure heart, nor seem to glance at thee?  
And in thy bowers of Camelot or of Usk  
Thy shadow still would glide from room to  
room,

---

## Guinevere

---

And I should evermore be vext with thee  
In hanging robe or vacant ornament,  
Or ghostly footfall echoing on the stair.  
For think not, tho' thou would'st not love thy  
    lord,

Thy lord has wholly lost his love for thee.  
I am not made of so slight elements.  
Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.  
I hold that man the worst of public foes  
Who either for his own or children's sake,  
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife  
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the  
    house :

For being thro' his cowardice allow'd  
Her station, taken everywhere for pure,  
She like a new disease, unknown to men,  
Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,  
Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and saps  
The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse  
With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young.  
Worst of the worst were that man he that  
    reigns!

Better the King's waste hearth and aching  
    heart  
Than thou reseated in thy place of light,  
The mockery of my people, and their bane."

He paused, and in the pause she crept an  
    inch  
Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet.  
Far off a solitary trumpet blew.  
Then waiting by the doors the warhorse neigh'd  
As at a friend's voice, and he spake again.

---

## Guinevere

---

"Yet think not that I come to urge thy  
crimes,  
I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,  
I, whose vast pity almost makes me die  
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,  
My pride in happier summers, at my feet.  
The wrath which forced my thoughts on that  
fierce law,  
The doom of treason and the flaming death,  
(When first I learnt thee hidden here) is past.  
The pang—which while I weigh'd thy heart  
with one  
Too wholly true to dream untruth in thee,  
Made my tears burn—is also past, in part.  
And all is past, the sin is sinn'd, and I,  
Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God  
Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the rest.  
But how to take last leave of all I loved?  
O golden hair, with which I used to play  
Not knowing! O imperial-moulded form,  
And beauty such as never woman wore,  
Until it came a kingdom's curse with thee—  
I cannot touch thy lips, they are not mine,  
But Lancelot's: nay, they never were the King's.  
I cannot take thy hand; that too is flesh,  
And in the flesh thou hast sinn'd; and mine  
own flesh,  
Here looking down on thine polluted, cries  
'I loathe thee:' yet not less, O Guinevere,  
For I was ever virgin save for thee,  
My love thro' flesh hath wrought into my life  
So far, that my doom is, I love thee still.

---

## Guinevere

---

Let no man dream but that I love thee still.  
Perchance, and so thou purify thy soul,  
And so thou lean on our fair father Christ,  
Hereafter in that world where all are pure  
We two may meet before high God, and thou  
Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and  
know

I am thine husband—not a smaller soul,  
Nor Lancelot, nor another. Leave me that,  
I charge thee, my last hope. Now must I hence.  
Thro' the thick night I hear the trumpet blow:  
They summon me their King to lead mine  
hosts

Far down to that great battle in the west,  
Where I must strike against my sister's son,  
Leagued with the lords of the White Horse and  
knights

Once mine, and strike him dead, and meet my-  
self

Death, or I know not what mysterious doom.  
And thou remaining here wilt learn the event;  
But hither shall I never come again,  
Never lie by thy side, see thee no more,  
Farewell!"

And while she grovell'd at his feet,  
She felt the King's breath wander o'er her  
neck,

And, in the darkness o'er her fallen head,  
Perceived the waving of his hands that blest.

Then, listening till those armed steps were  
gone,

---

## Guinevere

---

Rose the pale Queen, and in her anguish found  
The casement: "peradventure" so she thought,  
"If I might see his face, and not be seen."  
And lo, he sat on horseback at the door!  
And near him the sad nuns with each a light  
Stood, and he gave them charge about the  
Queen,  
To guard and foster her for evermore.  
And while he spake to these his helm was  
lower'd,  
To which for crest the golden dragon clung  
Of Britain; so she did not see the face,  
Which then was as an angel's, but she saw,  
Wet with the mists and smitten by the lights,  
The Dragon of the great Pendragonship  
Blaze, making all the night a steam of fire.  
And even then he turn'd; and more and more  
The moony vapour rolling round the King,  
Who seem'd the phantom of a Giant in it,  
Enwound him fold by fold, and made him gray  
And grayer, till himself became as mist  
Before her, moving ghostlike to his doom.

Then she stretch'd out her arms and cried  
aloud  
"Oh Arthur!" there her voice brake suddenly,  
Then—as a stream that spouting from a cliff  
Fails in mid air, but gathering at the base  
Re-makes itself, and flashes down the vale—  
Went on in passionate utterance.

"Gone—my lord!  
Gone thro' my sin to slay and to be slain!"

---

## Guinevere

---

And he forgave me, and I could not speak.  
Farewell? I should have answer'd his farewell.  
His mercy choked. Gone, my lord the King,  
My own true lord! How dare I call him mine?  
The shadow of another cleaves to me,  
And makes me one pollution: he, the King,  
Call'd me polluted: shall I kill myself?  
What help in that? I cannot kill my sin,  
If soul be soul; nor can I kill my shame;  
No, nor by living can I live it down.  
The days will grow to weeks, the weeks to  
months,  
The months will add themselves and make the  
years,  
The years will roll into the centuries,  
And mine will ever be a name of scorn.  
I must not dwell on that defeat of fame.  
Let the world be; that is but of the world.  
What else? what hope? I think there was a hope;  
Except he mock'd me when he spake of hope;  
His hope he call'd it; but he never mocks,  
For mockery is the fume of little hearts.  
And blessed be the King, who hath forgiven  
My wickedness to him, and left me hope  
That in mine own heart I can live down sin  
And be his mate hereafter in the heavens  
Before high God. Ah great and gentle lord,  
Who wast, as is the conscience of a saint  
Among his warring senses, to thy knights—  
To whom my false voluptuous pride, that took  
Full easily all impressions from below,  
Would not look up, or half-despised the height

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## Guinevere

---

To which I would not or I could not climb—  
I thought I could not breathe in that fine air  
That pure severity of perfect light—  
I wanted warmth and colour which I found  
In Lancelot—now I see thee what thou art,  
Thou art the highest and most human too,  
Not Lancelot, nor another. Is there none  
Will tell the King I love him tho' so late?  
Now—ere he goes to the great Battle? none:  
Myself must tell him in that purer life,  
But now it were too daring. Ah my God,  
What might I not have made of thy fair world,  
Had I but loved thy highest creature here?  
It was my duty to have loved the highest:  
It surely was my profit had I known:  
It would have been my pleasure had I seen.  
We needs must love the highest when we see it,  
Not Lancelot, nor another.”

Here her hand  
Grasp'd, made her vail her eyes: she look'd and  
saw  
The novice, weeping, suppliant, and said to her  
“Yea, little maid, for am *I* not forgiven?”  
Then glancing up beheld the holy nuns  
All round her, weeping; and her heart was  
loosed  
Within her, and she wept with these and said:

“Ye know me then, that wicked one, who  
broke  
The vast design and purpose of the King.

---

## Guinevere

---

O shut me round with narrowing nunnery-walls,  
Meek maidens, from the voices crying ‘shame.’  
I must not scorn myself: he loves me still.  
Let no one dream but that he loves me still.  
So let me, if you do not shudder at me  
Nor shun to call me sister, dwell with you;  
Wear black and white, and be a nun like you;  
Fast with your fasts, not feasting with your feasts;  
Grieve with your griefs, not grieving at your joys,  
But not rejoicing; mingle with your rites;  
Pray and be pray’d for; lie before your shrines;  
Do each low office of your holy house;  
Walk your dim cloister, and distribute dole  
To poor sick people, richer in his eyes  
Who ransom’d us, and haler too than I;  
And treat their loathsome hurts and heal mine own;  
And so wear out in almsdeed and in prayer  
The sombre close of that voluptuous day,  
Which wrought the ruin of my lord the King.”

She said: they took her to themselves ; and she  
Still hoping, fearing “is it yet too late?”  
Dwelt with them, till in time their Abbess died.  
Then she, for her good deeds and her pure life,  
And for the power of ministration in her,  
And likewise for the high rank she had borne,

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## Guinevere

---

Was chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess, lived  
For three brief years, and there, an Abbess,  
    past  
To where beyond these voices there is peace.

The Defence  
of Guenevere  
*William Morris*



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## The Defence of Guenevere

---

**B**UT, knowing now that they would have  
her speak,  
She threw her wet hair backward from  
her brow,  
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,

As though she had had there a shameful blow,  
And feeling it shameful to feel ought but shame,  
All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned  
so,

She must a little touch it; like one lame  
She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head  
Still lifted up; and on her cheek of flame

The tears dried quick; she stopped at last and  
said:  
“O knights and lords, it seems but little skill  
To talk of well-known things past now and dead.

“God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,  
And pray you all forgiveness heartily!  
Because you must be right such great lords—  
still

“Listen, suppose your time were come to die,  
And you were quite alone and very weak;  
Yea, laid a dying while very mightily

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## The Defence of Guenevere

---

“The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak  
Of river through your broad land running well:  
Suppose a hush should come, then some one  
speak:

““One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,  
Now choose one cloth for ever, which they be,  
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell

““Of your own strength and mightiness; here,  
see!”

Yea, yea, my lord, and you to ope your eyes,  
At foot of your familiar bed to see

“A great God’s angel standing, with such dyes,  
Not known on earth, on his great wings and  
hands,

Held out two ways, light from the inner skies

“Showing him well, and making his commands  
Seem to be God’s commands, moreover, too,  
Holding within his hands the cloths on wands;

“And one of these strange choosing cloths was  
blue,

Wavy and long, and one cut short and red;  
No man could tell the better of the two.

“After a shivering half-hour you said,  
‘God help! heaven’s colour, the blue;’ and he  
said, ‘hell’

Perhaps you then would roll upon your bed,

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## The Defence of Guenevere

---

“And cry to all good men that loved you well,  
‘Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, known;  
Launcelot went away, then I could tell,

“Like wisest man how all things would be,  
moan,  
And roll and hurt myself, and long to die,  
And yet fear much to die for what was sown.

“Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,  
Whatever may have happened through these  
years,  
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie.”

Her voice was low at first, being full of tears,  
But as it cleared, it grew full loud and shrill,  
Growing a windy shriek in all men’s ears,

A ringing in their startled brains, until  
She said that Gauwaine lied, then her voice  
sunk,  
And her great eyes began again to fill,

Though still she stood right up, and never  
shrunk,  
But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!  
Whatever tears her full lips may have drunk,  
She stood, and seemed to think, and wrung her  
hair,  
Spoke out at last with no more trace of shame,  
With passionate twisting of her body there:

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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“It chanced upon a day Launcelot came  
To dwell at Arthur’s Court; at Christmas-time  
This happened; when the heralds sung his name,

“‘Son of King Ban of Benwick,’ seemed to  
chime

Along with all the bells that rang that day,  
O’er the white roofs, with little change of rhyme.

“Christmas and whitened winter passed away,  
And over me the April sunshine came,  
Made very awful with black hail-clouds, yea

“And in the Summer I grew white with flame,  
And bowed my head down—Autumn, and the  
sick

Sure knowledge things would never be the  
same,

“However often Spring might be most thick  
Of blossoms and buds, smote on me, and I grew  
Careless of most things, let the clock tick, tick,

“To my unhappy pulse, that beat right through  
My eager body; while I laughed out loud,  
And let my lips curl up at false or true,

“Seemed cold and shallow without any cloud.  
Behold my judges, then the cloths were brought:  
While I was dizzied thus, old thoughts would  
crowd,

“Belonging to the time ere I was bought  
By Arthur’s great name and his little love,  
Must I give up for ever then, I thought,

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## The Defence of Guenevere

---

“That which I deemed would ever round me  
move

Glorifying all things; for a little word,  
Scarce ever meant at all, must I now prove

“Stone-cold for ever? Pray you, does the Lord  
Will that all folks should be quite happy and  
good?

I love God now a little, if this cord

“Were broken, once for all what striving could  
Make me love anything in earth or heaven.  
So day by day it grew, as if one should

“Slip slowly down some path worn smooth and  
even,

Down to a cool sea on a summer day;  
Yet still in slipping there was some small leaven

“Of stretched hands catching small stones by  
the way,

Until one surely reached the sea at last,  
And felt strange new joy as the worn head lay

“Back, with the hair like sea-weed; yea all past  
Sweat of the forehead, dryness of the lips,  
Washed utterly out by the dear waves o’ercast,

“In the lone sea, far off from any ships!  
Do I not know now of a day in Spring?  
No minute of that wild day ever slips

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## The Defence of Guenevere

---

“From out my memory; I hear thrushes sing,  
And wheresoever I may be, straightway  
Thoughts of it all come up with most fresh sting:

“I was half mad with beauty on that day,  
And went without my ladies all alone,  
In a quiet garden walled round every way;

“I was right joyful of that wall of stone,  
That shut the flowers and trees up with the sky,  
And trebled all the beauty: to the bone,

“Yea right through to my heart, grown very shy  
With weary thoughts, it pierced, and made me  
glad;  
Exceedingly glad, and I knew verily,

“A little thing just then had made me mad;  
I dared not think, as I was wont to do,  
Sometimes, upon my beauty; if I had

“Held out my long hand up against the blue,  
And, looking on the tenderly darken’d fingers,  
Thought that by rights one ought to see quite  
through,

“There, see you, where the soft still light yet  
lingers,  
Round by the edges; what should I have done,  
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,

“And startling green drawn upward by the sun?  
But shouting, loosed out, see now! all my hair,  
And trancedly stood watching the west wind run

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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“With faintest half-heard breathing sound—  
  why there

I lose my head e'en now in doing this;  
But shortly listen—in that garden fair

“Came Launcelot walking; this is true, the kiss  
Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,  
I scarce dare talk of the remember'd bliss,

“When both our mouths went wandering in  
  one way,  
And aching sorely, met among the leaves;  
Our hands being left behind strained far away.

“Never within a yard of my bright sleeves  
Had Launcelot come before—and now, so nigh!  
After that day why is it Guenevere grieves?

“Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,  
Whatever happened on through all those years,  
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie.

“Being such a lady could I weep these tears  
If this were true? A great queen such as I  
Having sinn'd this way, straight her conscience  
sears;

“And afterwards she liveth hatefully,  
Slaying and poisoning, certes never weeps,—  
Gauwaine be friends now, speak me lovingly.

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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“Do I not see how God’s dear pity creeps  
All through your frame, and trembles in your  
mouth?

Remember in what grave your mother sleeps,

“Buried in some place far down in the south,  
Men are forgetting as I speak to you;  
By her head sever’d in that awful drouth

“Of pity that drew Agravaine’s fell blow,  
I pray your pity! let me not scream out  
For ever after, when the shrill winds blow

“Through half your castle-locks! let me not  
shout  
For ever after in the winter night  
When you ride out alone! in battle rout

“Let not my rusting tears make your sword  
light!  
Ah! God of mercy how he turns away!  
So, ever must I dress me to the fight,

“So—let God’s justice work! Gauwaine, I say,  
See me hew down your proofs: yea all men know  
Even as you said how Mellyagraunce one day,

“One bitter day in *la Fausse Garde*, for so  
All good knights held it after, saw—  
Yea, sirs, by cursed unknightly outrage; though

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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“You, Gauwaine, held his word without a flaw,  
This Mellyagraunce saw blood upon my bed—  
Whose blood then pray you? is there any law

“To make a queen say why some spots of red  
Lie on her coverlet? or will you say,  
‘Your hands are white, lady, as when you wed,

“‘Where did you bleed?’ and must I stammer  
out—‘Nay’,  
I blush indeed, fair lord, only to rend  
My sleeve up to my shoulder, where there lay

“‘A knife-point last night:’ so must I defend  
The honour of the lady Guenevere?  
Not so, fair lords, even if the world should end

“This very day, and you were judges here  
Instead of God. Did you see Mellyagraunce  
When Launcelot stood by him? what white fear

“Curdled his blood, and how his teeth did dance,  
His side sink in? as my knight cried and said,  
‘Slayer of unarm’d men, here is a chance!

“‘Setter of traps, I pray you guard your head,  
By God I am so glad to fight with you,  
Stripper of ladies, that my hand feels lead

“‘Fordriving weight; hurrah now! draw and do,  
For all my wounds are moving in my breast,  
And I am getting mad with waiting so.’

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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“He struck his hands together o'er the beast  
Who fell down flat, and grovell'd at his feet,  
And groan'd at being slain so young—‘at least.’

“My knight said, ‘Rise you, sir, who are so fleet  
At catching ladies, half-arm'd will I fight,  
My left side all uncover'd!’ then I weet,

“Up sprang Sir Mellyagraunce with great de-  
light

Upon his knave's face; not until just then  
Did I quite hate him, as I saw my knight

“Along the lists look to my stake and pen  
With such a joyous smile, it made me sigh  
From agony beneath my waist-chain, when

“The fight began, and to me they drew nigh;  
Ever Sir Launcelot kept him on the right,  
And traversed warily, and ever high

“And fast leapt caitiff's sword, until my knight  
Sudden threw up his sword to his left hand,  
Caught it, and swung it; that was all the fight.

“Except a spout of blood on the hot land;  
For it was hottest summer; and I know  
I wonder'd how the fire, while I should stand,

“And burn, against the heat, would quiver so:  
Yards above my head; thus these matters went,  
Which things were only warnings of the woe

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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“That fell on me. Yet Mellyagraunce was shent,  
For Mellyagraunce had fought against the  
Lord;

Therefore, my lords, take heed lest you be blent

“With all this wickedness; say no rash word  
Against me, being so beautiful; my eyes,  
Wept all away the grey, may bring some sword

“To drown you in your blood; see my breast  
rise,

Like waves of purple sea, as here I stand;  
And how my arms are moved in wonderful wise,

“Yea also at my full heart’s strong command,  
See through my long throat how the words go up  
In ripples to my mouth; how in my hand

“The shadow lies like wine within a cup  
Of marvellously colour’d gold; yea now  
This little wind is rising, look you up,

“And wonder how the light is falling so  
Within my moving tresses: will you dare  
When you have looked a little on my brow,

“To say this thing is vile? or will you care  
For any plausible lies of cunning woof,  
When you can see my face with no lie there

“For ever? am I not a gracious proof—  
‘But in your chamber Launcelot was found’—  
Is there a good knight then would stand aloof,

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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“When a queen says with gentle queenly sound:  
‘O true as steel come now and talk with me,  
I love to see your step upon the ground

“Unwavering, also well I love to see  
That gracious smile light up your face, and hear  
Your wonderful words, that all mean verily

“The thing they seem to mean: good friend,  
so dear  
To me in everything, come here to-night,  
Or else the hours will pass most dull and drear;

“If you come not, I fear this time I might  
Get thinking over much of times gone by,  
When I was young, and green hope was insight:

“For no man cares now to know why I sigh;  
And no man comes to sing me pleasant songs,  
Nor any brings me the sweet flowers that lie

“So thick in the gardens; therefore one so  
longs  
To see you, Launcelot; that we may be  
Like children once again, free from all wrongs

“Just for one night.’ Did he not come to me?  
What thing could keep true Launcelot away  
If I said ‘Come?’ there was one less than three

“In my quiet room that night, and we were gay;  
Till sudden I rose up, weak, pale, and sick,  
Because a bawling broke our dream up, yea

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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“I looked at Launcelot’s face and could not speak,  
For he looked helpless too, for a little while;  
Then I remember how I tried to shriek,

“And could not, but fell down; from tile to tile  
The stones they threw up rattled o’er my head  
And made me dizzier; till within a while

“My maids were all about me, and my head  
On Launcelot’s breast was being soothed away  
From its white chattering, until Launcelot said—

“By God! I will not tell you more to-day,  
Judge any way you will—what matters it?  
You know quite well the story of that fray,

“How Launcelot still’d their bawling, the mad fit  
That caught up Gauwaine—all, all, verily,  
But just that which would save me; these  
things flit.

“Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,  
Whatever may have happen’d these long years,  
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie!

“All I have said is truth, by Christ’s dear tears.”  
She would not speak another word, but stood  
Turn’d sideways; listening, like a man who  
hears

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## The Defence of Guenevere

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His brother's trumpet sounding through the  
wood  
Of his foe's lances. She lean'd eagerly,  
And gave a slight spring sometimes, as she  
could

At last hear something really; joyfully  
Her cheek grew crimson, as the headlong speed  
Of the roan charger drew all men to see,  
The knight who came was Launcelot at good  
need.





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1800

Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson  
Guinevere

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